

The International Institute for Middle-East and Balkan Studies (**IFIMES**) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, regularly analyses events in the Middle East and the Balkans. **Ibrahim Bisharat**<sup>1</sup>, Good Governance and Development Specialist, has presented his view of the citizenship in the Middle East. His article entitled "**CITIZENSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS AND THE ROLE OF MIDDLE EAST CITIZENSHIP ASSEMBLY (MECA)**" is here published in its entirety.



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## **CITIZENSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS AND THE ROLE OF MIDDLE EAST CITIZENSHIP ASSEMBLY (MECA)**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

This is a white policy paper open for discussion among MECA members. It was prepared to address diagnosing citizenship issues in the Middle East to form a position accordingly, rather than an academic research<sup>2</sup> with a hypothesis question that needs to be tested. In addition to that fact, the paper is supposed to be used as a reference presented by MECA to the policy makers and the donors who might be

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<sup>2</sup> However, I believe this paper could serve as a starting point for an academic research.

interested in making a real constructive relationship between the citizens and the states in the Arab world.

The paper addresses the citizenship in general and not in any particular country, although I use some examples from specific countries. In the context of the paper, I also refer most of the time to the Arab World or the Arab States and not to the Middle East because Israel and Turkey have their own different citizenship<sup>3</sup> issues, which might need a separate research, that are not necessarily in common with the rest of the Arab World problems.

Finally, in this paper and the attached annexes, I addressed the comments I received from MECA coordinating committee members and MECA members during WANA/MECA conference that took place in Amman on January 8-9, 2008. Accordingly, I suggested how MECA strategy should be in the years 2008-2010.

## **ABSTRACT**

In this paper I argue that citizenship in the majority of the Middle East countries is an interest based legal concept that is used by the government as a tool to make sure the citizens do their obligations regardless if they are enjoying their political, civil or social rights. Even issuing citizens' basic civil rights documents including certificates, national identity cards, and passports, is also based on a political decision. The citizens' perception that their rights are protected is used as a tool by the state to relatively guarantee their loyalty to the government and to serve its apparatuses in its capacity as the national guard of the homeland, under the cover of national duties.

The failure of the state in founding a common developmental perception of citizenship among the citizens and the public servants was transformed negatively not only on the citizens' relation with the state, but also on their perception and practice of how their relationship would be among themselves on one hand and on classifying citizen layers per origin, economic, social and political status; (i.e) indigenous people, political leaders in power, tribes, migrants, refugees and minorities. Such negative transformation strengthened bonds of care across boundaries of tribalism, localism, political affiliation, inequality, exclusion, ideologies, religion, power, nation and geography and even lead to destructive individualism and to creating a generation with a built in sceptic concept of who is a citizen.

## **ARGUMENTS**

Citizenship equivalent in the Arab world has never been based on the exact term perceived by the Western countries as of the days of Athens due to different political

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<sup>3</sup> They will be referred to in regards to citizenship among minorities.

and historical conditions. Even in Athens itself citizenship was selective and bound by the governor's decision.. The political decisions made in the Western societies were not based on kin and blood relations, while it was in the Arab world<sup>4</sup>. Manna' 1997 and many others state that the people pre Islam belonged to the tribe which was the representative of the government in the current terms. Such tribe identity continued to exist until today in a way or another regardless if the people were governed by Islamic or national governments. The relation to a national geographical homeland was manifested clearly as a result of the West occupation to the Arab lands, where the Arab nationals became fighters for freedom. The confusion of who is a citizen continuous to be in the minds of the Arab citizens. Through my trial to know how the Arab people think of their identity, I searched the web and found out that one participant<sup>5</sup> from Saudi Arabia said that "The citizen is the one who follows the order of the "Oli al-Amr", which means that citizens perceive themselves as subjects. A Kuwaiti citizen said "The citizen is the one who defend his land and not the one who holds the passport of his country". My wife said, "The citizen is just a mobile mass without value, oppressed by the regimes in the Arab world". My brother in law said. "The citizen is a depressed human being that has no say". This variation of citizenship association to law, political participation, land and nation was also confirmed by the participants of WANA/MECA January 8-9 conference in Amman.

The definitions of citizenship in terms of identity, nationalism, sense of membership, belonging, loyalty, inclusion, marginalization, sense of acceptance, homogeneity and sameness, exclusion and stigmatization are the people's expressions of attitude, positive or negative, towards their political and social treatment by their states. The lack of the states' responsiveness to the citizens' right to political participation and equality put these definitions in conflicting paradigms and layers and became a tool for tensions and conflicts inter states and intra states on the account of establishing democratic states that respects their constituencies. The citizenship in the modern democratic<sup>6</sup> secular sense in which a citizen's identity is defined by a nation state, and the identities of tribe, ethnic group, religion exist in the Arab world, were used interchangeably according to the balance of powers between the political well of the governments and the power of the tribe or the ethnic or the religious group. Examples are clear in the relationship between the Coptic Christian minority in Egypt, the Palestinian ethnic minority in Israel, the Palestinians in Jordan, the Kurds in Turkey and the power of the tribes in most of the Arab countries.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to notice that citizenship concept in terms of rights and responsibilities of the citizens toward the state and vise versa existed in the East but was not understood, comprehended or mastered by the peoples due to the fact that the relation between the people and the governor was perceived as a relation between a son and his father...

<sup>5</sup> I did just an arbitrary chatting in October 2007 on a Gulf chat website. [www.khleeg.com](http://www.khleeg.com) to find out how the chatters perceive " who is a citizen ".

In spite of the gloomy tendency of approaching the concept, I also claim that the human being's character is responsive by nature, in particular if empowered and given the tools to do so. Consequently, broken bonds of care and responsibility by the State towards its citizens could be gradually and constructively put in order and fixed. This could be manifested and provided by multi track approach; policy making and results based and concrete practice on the ground that address increasing the knowledge, and changing the attitudes and the practices of the public servants and the citizens, in regards to their interpretation of the citizenship concept itself and its connotation with rights and responsibilities.

On one hand, the ultimate goal will then be the governments' apparatuses and policy makers' reconsidering positively their own belief in the developmental role of the citizens and that they are the latter's service providers. Accordingly the governments' actions change by dealing with the citizens as first class citizens who are independent and have a say in the policy making process, and not as subjects<sup>7</sup>, and by treating them equally before and by the law.

On the other hand, the citizens themselves, are self empowered and regaining self trust to go beyond the closed circles of self exclusion, tribalism and localism and actively and constructively participate in all developmental life disciplines to make sure that they are perceived by the policy makers and the public servants as active entities that have a say in the decision making process and can be a real developmental safety valve that limit the government's abuse of good governance or in a diplomatic empowering way, to be catalysts for promoting good governance.

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### **DIAGNOSIS OF THE AMBIGUOUS USE OF CONCEPT OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

Through reading the literature on the development of the citizenship concept in the Arab world I found that the term has different de facto conceptual, cultural, legal, political and socio economic connotations and manifestations.

The writers<sup>8</sup> agree that the heritage of the different ruling systems as of early Islam, through the different Islamic Khalifas starting by the Umayyad period, through Abbasid period and ending by four hundred years of the Ottoman Empire ruined the concept of citizens' political participation that was embodied in the Shura system in early Islam. In addition to that, Arab people have lived all their life under the collective authority of the family and the tribe, where the unlimited authority of the father and the male was dominant.

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<sup>7</sup> Subjects mean in this connotation being a subordinate and a follower acted upon.

<sup>8</sup> There is a huge reference material on the internet and in the libraries on citizenship.



Islamic system was a tool that meant to breakdown tribalism and gives the individual the opportunity to have a say through the Shura and the right to appeal through equal access to law, but this tool was then not used and the Imam took advantage of it to rule by law.

After the killing<sup>9</sup> of Khalifa's Othman and Ali, the political system of Islam became a tool by the governor to discriminate between the citizens who are Muslims and non Muslims and also between the Muslims themselves. The law enforcement and access to law became selective and mostly determined by the Imam/Khalifa. Also, the Islamic state became larger and the control of the central government became weaker and the negative use of decentralization became a de facto tool to give an ultimate power to the Wali "The governor in the modern terms". Therefore, the citizenship concept became vague and the people started thinking again of their collective identity based on tribalism, interest groups, family relations, ethnicity, etc.

As we go on chronologically, the Arab/Islamic governments became totalitarian, and the citizen rights were more and more abused by the regimes. This totalitarian system was more explicit under the four hundred years of the ottoman empire which governed by "rule by Islam" and not "rule of Islam", in addition to the discrimination between Arabs and non Arabs and between different beliefs "Madaheb"<sup>10</sup> within Islam.

Ottomans' rule was negatively perceived by the Arabs and they felt that their national identity is threatened again, in addition to the fact that their Islamic identity does not necessarily protect them as equal citizens. This attitude was fostered by the Western countries that supported the Arab revolution against the Ottoman Empire and promised them to achieve the Arab nationality and unity. However, this support and promise was not achieved. The Arab people became nationals of geopolitical separation which made them national fighters to liberate their own countries that were either occupied by the British, the French or the Italian regime.

Therefore, the Arab people in each geopolitical entity became fighters for freedom for a local geopolitical nationality rather than a one united Arab nationality. Accordingly, the Arabs who became Muslims to fight the pre-Islamic era of slavery perceived themselves as slaves in different forms; slaves of the ruling Muslim Arab Khalifas, the non Arab Ottoman Khalifas, or the Western non Muslim governments. Consequently, the effect of "ruling by law" made the citizens lose the hope in representative governments. The rulers used "rule by law" for their own interest to stay in power regardless of the people's needs and regardless of the public interest.

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<sup>9</sup> In fact they were assassinated.

<sup>10</sup> Manna'1997 confirms that the khalifas rule by their own self interpretation of Islam and that the unique example that really promotes the modern term citizenship was during the rule of Omar Ibn al-Khattab; the second Khailifa after the prophet Mohammad.

Accordingly, the sense of belongings and the identity of the Arab people became very gloomy. The Arab citizens started questioning their identity; is it associated with the government in place who set the rules, or the land in which they were born and raised. Whom they should defend in case of war or attack on the country; the regime or the homeland? Such questioning of identity and belonging was explicit during the fall of Baghdad in 2003 and the fall of Gaza in June 2006. Apparently, the loyalty to the governments was conditional by being on the pay roll of the month.

The British mandate made sure that the independent Arab states in the late sixties were ruled by heads of rich tribes and thus the citizens became subjects and they accepted that status since these tribes in power were perceived as the fighters for freedom. Accordingly, the dilemma of the political identity was solved by the British and the French by making the heads of the states from tribes and then the states became tribal oriented. Aha, then the people themselves were raised to think as Kuwaitis, Jordanians, Syrians, Palestinians, Egyptians, etc, that were seasonally have a political identity when they fight each other, but domestically another layer was there to break down their political identity from within. Citizens then most of the time showed and tried, hypocritically, to prove that they are loyal to the governing authorities to be good citizens. Accordingly, both the non democratic governments and the politically ignorant people alike thought of the opposers to the regimes as not good citizens; if they oppose and don't follow the Alawi regime in Syria, the Saudi family in Saudia, or the Sabbah family in Kuwait, or the Hashemite in Jordan, or the Gaddafi green book in Libya.

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What interesting here, is being a follower became institutionalized in the minds of the people to protect their own interests, and the governments, even though they were aware of the people's hypocrisy, did not stop it and did not make effective change in their policy and systems on the levels of transparency and accountability to empower the citizens to be more honest and to perceive and believe that freedom of expression and constructive criticism is a tool to build and not a threat to put an end to the regimes.

Then what shall we do; how can we became respected citizens, the answer is very clear again in the mind of a typical individual who does not internalize the political concept of a citizen: hypocrisy to the system as long as it is in power, then kill it when you can. Exactly like this proverb in Arabic, "Boos el kalb fe tommo lamma takhod 7aqak minno" which means "Kiss the dog in the mouth until you get from him your right." Or in modern terms "the goal justifies the means". This indicates that there is an internal awareness of rights but no belief among the individual citizens that they are capable of making a change. Then, instead of facing the regime, or being allowed to face it, and to point out at its failures, citizens preferred or were forced to skip this fact.

Accordingly, the fight for respect for human rights is allowed if these rights are abused by the occupier like the Palestinian Israel conflict and accordingly once can demonstrate against the occupation, but imprisoned if he/she demonstrates against the government's lack of performance. Unfortunately, both average citizens<sup>11</sup> and non democratic governments are afraid of freedom of speech. Neither the citizens nor the governments trust that freedom of speech could be used as a constructive tool for reform and not a tool to threat others.

Then those people who are not among the silent majority will be perceived into two divided groups; either hypocrites or revolutionists that will overtake the authority by military means since they will claim that peaceful tools to change the system are not productive.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: CITIZENSHIP AND NATIONALISM**

In the Western countries citizenship has been the legal tool to make sure citizens are all equal and have rights and responsibilities from and towards the government. It was realized by the people in the West before the East, but did not come over night. It was manifested gradually as Athens of selective citizenship, through the separation between the church and the state, World War I and after World War II. In the Western countries, provision of a passport was not only a legal document for traveling a broad but a legal tool to protect those citizens when they are out of their countries as well. Citizens are considered legally, politically and socially and economically partners of the state in the decision making process. It is taken for granted that a citizen regardless of religion or sex or political affiliation is an entity and his/her rights are protected by the government. I agree with Godfrey Guntatilleke note that the relationship between citizen and state depends vitally on the political system and the constitutions which govern it. It is essentially the product of the democratic system.

Political participation in the Arab world is used as a framework to make sure the government body stays in power. Most of the Arab states are unilateral party system if not royal. The citizens are called for "Istifta", "Public Referendum", for presidential elections and the president has the power to change even the constitution to make sure he/stays in power. Of course one would argue that Arab people are not yet ready for democracy and the citizens do not until now perceive that power could be transferred peacefully and that the fighters for freedom and democracy will be totalitarian as well. This could be a true fact, but not a justification to stay in power for ever and to pass the authority to the presidents' own children. The fight between Hamas and Fatah in Palestine is an example. Fatah, Israel and the USA and most of

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to notice that human rights movements do exist in the Arab world and struggle to defend citizen rights in their countries but unfortunately are wanted and raced by the regimes.

the international community did not acknowledge the fact that Hamas came into power by the citizens free choice and then embarked financial siege on Hamas government. At the same time, Hamas could not digest that public administration tools are to be used democratically and went to (de)legitimize its legitimate rule by military force. Apparently, people's believe in democratic practice is not on democratic principles and democratic spirit to maintain justice and equality among the citizens, but on the interest based democratic game to govern or to stay in power.

However, when there are domestic conflicts and even external conflicts, the citizenship concept could be broken down and the perceived sense of belonging and identity rises contrary to citizenship in the modern terms of a democratic state. Just for clarification, such situation was manifested against colored people in the USA and the European countries after 9/11 and has been the case against Palestinians in Israel, Sunnis and Shies in Iraq, in Iran and in the Gulf, Turkish and Kurds in Turkey, Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt, and Fatah and Hamas in Palestine, etc.

The fact that we are all Arabs was an identification of the political identity in the national Arab movements against the occupation of the Arab countries. Such identity was fragmented as I wrote above, into the Arab states themselves. The cultural identity and the interest based state security in defining who is a Palestinian, a Lebanese, or an Egyptian, etc is very clear in the abuse of the woman citizenship by law. Such fragmentation went that far in the American Arab reaction to 9/11 event on the identity itself. Being an Arab or a Muslim become a suspicious identity and holding an American passport is not any more a tool of protection of the citizens. Therefore, the compatriot concept<sup>12</sup> widely spread as well in the US and the Western countries.

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Regarding socioeconomic rights, the Arab governments and the ruling families are rich while the general public is poor. Financial support to the poor that is well covered by the media is not the social welfare department role in fighting poverty but the gifts "Hibat" off the prince, the president or the king. Such attitude and practice of the governments institutionalizes the perception of the citizens as subordinates and followers rather than human beings with dignity that should be respected. Of course, the poor citizen can say nothing to make sure he/she gets his daily meal, the rich does not care since time is money and the average middle class citizen who is supposed to change the situation is crippled.

In brief, the gloomy perception of the citizenship was affected by many factors and conditions and conflicts; namely, the value system and the schools of thought, the relation between the Arab States and the West, the occupation, the resistance and

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<sup>12</sup> The concept is original and in the Arab world and used widely due to the tribalism nature of the Arab people that was enhanced by the ruling governments.



the liberation, post liberation and the need for the enemy (others), who governs whom until when, lack of scientific and logic thinking, lack of developmental vision, unfair of sharing wealth, lack of self esteem and trust, destructive individualism and ruling by the minority, rule by law and not rule of law.

### **CRITICAL ISSUES FACING MECA<sup>13</sup>**

The challenges facing MECA are mainly conceptual and pragmatic in terms of the relations between the East and the West. On the level of concepts, MECA will face the Arab perceptions of citizenship, democracy and autocracy. As for East and West relations, MECA will face conflicting demands by the East from the West and vice versa. More details on the two challenges are explained as follows:-

### **CITIZENSHIP AND MUWATANAH**

The word “Muatanah” used in Arabic is not the same as the word “citizenship” in English, “citoyennete” in French and “Politeia” in Greek. While citizenship in these language refer to a legal identity of the “citizen” that has rights and duties in his/her relations with the state, the word “Muwatanah” refers to the relationship between the individual and Al-Watan (the Homeland) and the word “Muwatan” is the “compatriot” in English refereeing to the person living in the same piece of land, and not to a citizen. Moreover the compatriots are divided upon familial, sectarian, and cliental lines, more than the lines of diversity, and juxtaposition is existed as an alternative to democratic pluralism.

Therefore the concept of citizen opposite to the state as another legal entity, did not exist in the Middle Eastern culture, but what was present at that space is a state that take care of their “subjects” (Ra’aya). Nowadays there are people who are still yearning to the establishment of an Islamic state where they will be its subjects<sup>14</sup>, lesser group is looking for Arabic United State that they will be its subjects, while the group that calls for build-up of citizenship concept and practices are a minority, some of them are calling for that build up within the current Middle Eastern states, and some others of them are looking for the promotion of citizenship within the framework of Middle East Union, or Arabic Unity. With that lack of the notion of citizenship, and with the fragmentation of those liberal democrats who are calling for it.

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<sup>13</sup> This section is based on MECA strategy paper for 2006-2008 that was prepared by Walid Salim. The options of how to address them is addressed below in terms of conceptual framework strategy and separately on operational strategy in the attached revised strategy paper for 2008-2010.

<sup>14</sup> They belief that an Islamic state would guarantee the election of a just Islamic governor that protect their rights.

## **DEMOCRACY**

The word “democracy” was understood in the Middle East as “the Sovereignty of the people”, since undemocratic existed regimes thought of themselves as representatives of the peoples (self appointed: but this makes no sense for these regimes), therefore they considered that the “sovereignty of the people” will be achieved by obedience of their regimes by the “subjects”. What was and still absent in this regard is the understating of democracy as it is being “the sovereignty of the citizens” as the components of the so called “people”, because without the word “citizens” as components to the word people, the last will become vague and empty word that the regimes can claim representing it as happened. The absence of citizenship in the Middle East led again here to the absence of democracy as a product of a contract between free sovereign citizens. This situation was sustained by the absence of political freedom in the Middle East. As Bernard Lewis the well known American historian rightly noticed: “Freedom in the West meant, political freedom, while in the Middle East it means not to be a slave” (foreign Affairs, magazine, May/June 2005). With that situation democracy was abbreviated in the Middle East to restricted elections, restricted pluralism, and therefore to a system of “democracy without democrats”, and also without citizens.

## **AUTOCRACY**

Some Islamic interpretations sustained the antidemocratic discourse by advocating that it is contradictory with the “Shura”, and that Islamic pluralism is different than the western one, and that the sovereignty should be for God and not for elected rulers. Therefore both autocrats and theocrats are advocating against democracy in the region.

Autocracy and despotism in the region created internal and external responses to it, the internal response (and in the absence of nonviolent strategies and training) took the shape of local terrorism, which became global later on. The external response came through external intervention such as occupying Iraq by a coalition led by the USA. The external intervention created by itself terrorist responses to it accompanied with resistance response, in a way that occupation feed led terrorism and vise versa. Also some interpretations of Islam justified terrorism (Ben Laden and Taliban type of Islamic activism).

## **EAST AND WEST RELATIONS**

The gap between East and West is widening, the last two decades witnessed increasing confrontation between the two. The caricature crisis this year showed how much the west was unable to understand the importance of symbols to the East, and

how much the East was unable to understand that the symbols are not sacred in the West, but can be criticized by different means including by the caricatures. This inability to understand each other is a result of deep misunderstanding: historical, cultural, but also on the economic benefits, and the global decision making. The West in this regard is criticizing the East of being unable to condemn and to act against terrorism exported from the East to the West, while the East consider these terrorist acts as results to the West crimes against the East.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also one of the big issues of the gap between East and West, where the East consider the West responsible for the creation of Israel. Intra and inter-conflicts spread in the area, such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, Israel- Palestine, Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, Afghanistan...etc. Also there are special problems of freedoms, and civil society development in each country in the area.

### **PROPOSED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MECA TO PROMOTE CITIZENSHIP IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

As I wrote earlier, Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice are the three-leg vehicle for change. Initiatives for change in terms of civic education and democracy promotion were mostly limited to increasing the knowledge of the people of the concepts and the structure rather than the attitude and the behaviour. Changing the attitudes and the practices of the people and the governments, which is rightfully needs allot of time to be changed, was systemically addressed by the Western organizations and sporadically by the Eastern. Citizenship indicators<sup>15</sup> was part of different studies in USA and Europe and to the best of my knowledge has not been studied in the Arab world.

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### **AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR CONSTRUCTIVE PRESENTATION OF CITIZENSHIP**

The above mentioned conditions and factors are still valid. Addressing each of them is beyond this policy paper. Nevertheless, the concept can be addressed and presented in a constructive approach as follows.

Given that the majority of the Arab states are not democratic in particular in the sense of being responsive to the relation between the government and its constituencies, dealing with the concept needs a comprehensive approach on the level of knowledge, attitudes and practices of the state and the citizens. Consequently, one

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<sup>15</sup> This includes but not limited to equality, equality before law, participatory democracy and rule of law.

would ask three legitimate questions; where shall we start from, the state or the citizens? Can we work on parallel levels? and whose responsibility to change the situation and make it better, the citizens, or the governments? What are the challenges and the obstacles in the road? How we can over come these obstacles.

### **LEGAL AWARENESS OF THE CONCEPT AND ALLIANCES**

Apparently the citizenship concept itself has not been deeply and qualitatively studied in the Arab world, the studies available that address it are theoretical and the audiences of these studies are the intellectuals. Therefore, the starting point is not in the right direction. There is a need for field qualitative and quantitative studies to determine the citizens' awareness of and attitudes toward the concept. Afterwards, increasing the awareness of the citizens themselves on the concept should be addressed within the context of the culture of each country in a constructive way. I mean that the citizens are eager to learn more about their rights and responsibilities and would need more guided approach, in particular using the legal aid approach that can not be controversial by the governments. All the Arab constitutions present clearly that all people are equal citizens before the law. Such related articles in the constitutions are the 101 course for the learning process without fear. Accordingly legal awareness campaign by ME|CA and the mandated civil society organizations and advocacy groups could lead to an increase of the public's perception of their rights. However, the articles of the constitution guaranteeing equality before the law is only theoretical. The Arab states do not implement them on the ground and those who are engaging themselves in the civic education of the people about their right are not provided the space by the governments to do their job. Only two human rights organization were recently allowed in KSA and those human and citizen rights activists in the rest of the Arab world are marked trouble makers.

On one hand, and parallel to that one could work with the governments to allow opening more legal and human rights organizations to work on the citizens rights within the legal context of the country and on education as well. On the education level, there is a need to work with the ministry of education on introducing citizenship education as part of the curriculum, but with being aware how the concept is introduced to make sure that is not out of context and to avoid using it as a tool to foster loyalty to the government. Many Arab organizations are already working on civic education and women rights and they could be the first alliance to MECA. Kawakbi center in and Aisha women organization in Morocco, Citizen Rights Society and Adalah center in Israel, Palestinian NGOs network in Palestine and the Arab NGOs network are just examples of alliances.

In addition to that, the public servants, each in his/his job related functions must be aware, or draw to his/her awareness by formal procedures that his duty is to serve the citizens with a high service quality and without hesitation or nepotism and



favouritism, but also not to use the rigid text of the law to prevent citizens' access to their rights. Currently, the public servants are not aware, or skip, that they are employees of the government to serve the public and not to make use of their power. To make sure that this happens, governments can include/initiate the Citizens Rights Covenants tailored to the service provided for them i.e. patient rights, social rights, teachers' rights, employees' rights, and citizen rights per se. On this regard MECA main alliance will be WANA. WANA could be the main advocate to empower the governments to create the enabling environment for constructive citizenship in the region.

## **ATTITUDES**

The challenge of changing the attitudes of the public servants of citizen rights is more complicated than increasing their knowledge in the subject matter. Of course they are aware of the citizen rights, but more often selective, and would easily use different law articles to make sure the citizen pays taxes, fees, etc. The attitudes of the public servants themselves is truly determined by the political system and the power holders who govern the country and accordingly the public servants are paid for enforcing the laws without objections. Consequently, the public servants would not like to loose their jobs and accordingly they would interpret the law as a text and not as spirit as long as they are not held accountable to their deeds. The public servants would neither try to initiate nor to provide the citizens with their rights. The civil employees start thinking of retirement from almost month one on board. More problematic is the fact that citizens then and often forced to bribe the public servants in the Ikramyah/Bakhseesh<sup>16</sup> misleading principle to get their rights. This is true on the borders, at the ministries of interior and whenever the citizen needs a service from the state. Of course such situation will inculcate a negative attitude of the citizens towards the state and the public servants and it will lead to mistrust in the system and make some state's reform initiatives for reform perceived by the citizens misleading and hypocritical.

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## **PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTISES**

### **The Role of the State**

The first thing the state should do is really to work with the citizens who brought into a power as partners who have the right to form an opinion in the decision making process, politically, economically and socially. Such political will shall of course oblige the state to increase its budgets to improve the social welfare and the political participation of the citizens. Here, I don't mean only voting every four years, or

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<sup>16</sup> It is often a bribe under the cover of a gift.

participating an public questionnaire , but a continuous institutionalization way of enabling the civil society to be active, pro active and creative.

The state should put systems in place and in particular formal procedures to make sure the citizens in general and the public servants in particular not only abide by the laws but also conceive the laws as tool for improving their life and not tools for punishing them only and the laws should be also legislated and implemented in that way. Such systems should have also regular monitoring procedures. That approach shall include accountability and transparency systems and indicators for them to measure the performance of the public servants. Code of conduct, ethics regulations, regular training, and capacity development for the staff are a must to inculcate a positive perception of the role of the government in the people's mind. I claim that one main reason for the low ratio of voting in the USA and other countries in Europe is the fact that the average citizens take for granted that what ever political party wins elections will abide by law and will not threat or abuse mainly their civil and political<sup>17</sup> rights.

At the same time, the state should establish empowering citizenship mechanisms to enhance the good conduct of the citizens and the public servant. A fair example to mention is the role of traffic police in the United Arab Emirates. The police run after the drivers who drive safely to provide them with incentives in addition to chasing the abusers of traffic law for ticketing them. Such a balance is quite fair and represents a good example of striking a balance between empowerment and punishment.

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Revenues and Taxes collecting procedures and quality of services are also a tool to change the attitudes of the citizens. Respect for Rule of law, fair and just law enforcement, equality before law, equal access to law, fair trials are also other mechanisms that can be used to re gain trust between the citizens and the state.

Protection of Human Rights and Citizen Rights including but not limited to freedoms; freedom of speech and opinion, movement, political affiliation and participation, property rights, gender equity, right to access to health, to work, to education, to social welfare should be part of the agenda of the policy makers of the Arab states for building democracy| on the political level.

However, such political and social rights could not be achieved if the state does not work to alleviate poverty and provide jobs for the people. The unemployed people are good candidates for the state's destruction politically and economically.

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<sup>17</sup> Civil, political and economic rights groups usually work to inform the citizens on how each candidate party will/ will not address those rights.

Given the fact that not all the MECA countries have democratic regimes it is important to confirm that this can be done even in non-democratic states but within a limited way. Social and economic rights are closely linked to political and civil rights and people can not participate in decision making freely unless they enjoy democratic rights. Therefore, the role of MECA will be enhancing the citizens' knowledge and attitudes to make the change and at the same time giving them the skills to defend their rights. Parallel to that, WANA and MECA could cooperate to advocate among the donors to use their money as a tool of empowerment and pressure on the governments to reform. The themes of this section could be translated into concrete projects by the governments. Currently, the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt are among the cooperative partners for reform. USAID, UNDP and the EU are implementing several projects in this regard to promote economic, social and political reform.

### **The Role of the Civil Society**

Citizens' Role is very crucial to make a change, but if the citizens themselves do not initiate and ask for the change, the governments will easily perceive that the citizens are happy and satisfied. Accordingly, the government will behave in away that is viewed as convenient, without being held accountable for its acts. Therefore, the work for citizenship and democracy should be from bottom- up also. MECA can partnership and work with community based organizations to encourage them to work for the citizens interests in their communities and to encourage them to regulate their mandates to be held accountable by their assemblies and accordingly activate and monitor the performance of their elected governing bodies.

In the Arab world, the majority of civil society organizations start launching their initial programs to really respond to a gap or a need in the community. However, these organizations do not work enough on their own organizational behaviour including their governance systems and internal control. The organizations become staff oriented chasing donors to keep their staff on board and start working on projects that are of interest to the donors rather than responsive to a program need in the community. Therefore, their role as representatives of the citizens in front of their governments becomes not that efficient and even de legitimized. Even, their legitimate requests for change would not be perceived as a community need but as a project that is funded by a donor. Worse than that is the mistrust of the citizens that will be a consequent of the organizations lack of transparency and accountability. However, the NGOs who work on programs that are well studied and respond to the needs of their constituencies could build trust with the community, with the donors and with the governments. One typical example I recently recall is Musawa " the Palestinian Center for Law and Justice" Ramallah based organization in Palestine that almost closed by the end of 2006 due to lack of funding. This NGO strategically reviewed its financial and administrative systems and moved from working on

projects into programs and then attracted many European donors in 2007. Another typical example is Adalah “Maintaining Justice” NGO in Israel that is membership based of more than two thousand citizens and lawyers. It relies on membership fees and donations more than donors and its programs are responsive to the needs of the Palestinians citizens in Israel. Nevertheless, the membership and the program criteria are not enough for NGOs working on promoting rule of law, respect for human and citizen to function. They need a constitutional umbrella to enable them legally to function.

### **SET OF OPTIONS FOR MECA TO PROCEED**

In order for MECA to proceed and face all the above written challenges and to effectively contribute to the promotion of citizenship in the Arab world, MECA has the following options:-

#### **1. At act as an NGO**

This is the current legal status of MECA. It was registered in Holland and thus it can open chapters in any country provided that there is a legal constitutional umbrella to protect its members and allow them to work. However, this option can limit the membership and leave it to be staff oriented. I don't think this the aim of the founding members of MECA

#### **2. To act as an advocacy and lobbying group:**

This option will enable the current members of MECA in each country to establish their own advocacy group by working on citizenship education with different target groups including women, children and youth. Such option will also enable MECA to work not only with citizens but also with governmental institutions such as the ministry of education, parliament members and the private sector. However, the limit of this choice is that MECA will work with the middle class and won't reach the grassroots.

#### **3. To act as a peoples/grassroots/ citizens movement**

This option covers options one and two and then proceeds to a wide sector of the society; namely the grassroots, by trying to reach every citizen in each of the country members. This option could be the ultimate goal of MECA if we want a long term objective of having active citizens and active citizenship that will produce democratic societies. However, given the role of IT and the internet, this option could be functional and productive by using virtual MECA community that was proposed by Edy and Rabi. But it will need allot of time, human resources and money to reach every citizen.



#### **4. To advocate for West Asia and North Africa( WANA) region concerns.**

The option of advocating in behalf of WANA region issues will enlarge MECA mandate to include targeting governments since WANA civil society organizations are supposed to work with the governments and thus the focus of MECA to work with the community will be affected. However, the cooperation between MECA and WANA organizations is very important and could have a fruitful product. Accordingly, the relation with the governments will positively affect WANA organizations position and strengthen it since WANA organizations will be perceived by the governments as advocacy groups that are backed up by the citizens. Therefore, MECA and WANA organizations can complement each other and work as twins. MECA will work with the citizens and WANA organizations with the governments. It's clear that WANA organizations experience will help MECA allot as stated in different sections above. WANA organizations for sure will have also civil society representatives in its membership which will be a good tool to remind WANA organizations of the citizens concerns and at the same time MECA will be the citizens back up for WANA organizations. Per the reports presented in WANA/MECA January 2008 conference in Amman, WANA organizations succeeded in working with the governments in WANA region while MECA is expected to be challenged by the governments in MECA region . Thus WANA organizations expertise is supposed to be a good feedback to MECA work.

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#### **CONCLUSIONS**

Accordingly, to have a democratic government, we need to have concerned citizens and an enabling environment to foster their demand for good governance and better perceived citizenship. Working from bottom up in parallel with working with the governments could be promising although it's a long way faced with challenges. Such challenges include but not limited to logistical and behavioural constraints.

It's a human nature to reject change even in one's own daily life. That's the case unfortunately. The citizen in the Arab world has not been raised to interfere or even to intervene to make a change as long as he/she him/herself is not harmed personally. The perception of the public interest as a personal self-interest is not yet conceived by the majority of the community in the Arab world.. Therefore, citizens have to be educated not only to know their civil, political and social rights and responsibilities, but also to change their attitudes towards their life.

Afterwards, the work with the governments could be, to a certain extent, less challenging when the governments realize there are educated constituencies who know what they want and steadfast on their positions.. Therefore, in MECA strategy

for 2008-2010, I will do my best to suggest and classify proposed initiatives in a SMART style, (Simple, Mature, Achievable and Tangible), and of course within the manageable interests of MECA.

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